United Nations E/CN.7/2002/3

# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
21 December 2001

Original: English

**Commission on Narcotic Drugs**
Forty-fifth session
Vienna, 11-15 March 2002
Item 6 (b) of the provisional agenda*
**Drug demand reduction: world situation with regard to drug abuse, in particular the spread of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) through drug injection**

## Prevention of the recreational and leisure use of drugs among young people

### Report of the Executive Director

Contents


| | | Paragraphs | Page |
|---|---|---|---|
| I. | Introduction | 1-4 | 2 |
| II. | The abuse of drugs in the context of recreational and leisure activities | 5-12 | 2 |
| III. | Action undertaken by Member States to prevent the recreational use of drugs | 13-19 | 4 |
| IV. | UNDCP activities | 20-27 | 5 |
| V. | Conclusions | 28-35 | 6 |


* E/CN.7/2002/1.

V.01-90034 (E) 170102 180102

# I. Introduction

1. At its forty-fourth session, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs adopted resolution 44/5, entitled "Prevention of recreational and leisure use of drugs among young people". In that resolution, the Commission expressed concern "about the new trends in drug use among young people who abuse illicit, and misuse licit, psychoactive substances for recreational purposes and during their leisure time". In the same resolution, the Commission encouraged States, inter alia, to develop information systems and prevention programmes aimed at raising public awareness of the risks associated with the new trends in illicit drug use among young people, in particular in recreational areas; to promote the participation of young people in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of prevention strategies and activities targeting illicit drug use among young people; to develop appropriate means of communicating and distributing information aimed at young people and designed to promote healthy ways of life conducive to the enjoyment of free time without the use of drugs; and to adapt their research on drug addiction and their treatment networks and health, education and social services, taking into account the new patterns of illicit drug use.

2. In its resolution 44/5, the Commission requested the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) to provide to States, upon request, guidance and assistance in developing strategies and programmes for reducing illicit drug demand, especially among young people in recreational areas, and encouraged it to gather detailed, evaluated information on successful experiences in prevention programmes in countries throughout the world and to disseminate that information to States and practitioners. Finally, in the same resolution, the Executive Director of UNDCP was requested to submit to the Commission at its forty-fifth session a report on the implementation of that resolution. The present report is submitted in response to that request.

3. The structure of the present report is as follows: an overview of the abuse of drugs for recreational purposes is provided in section II; what is known about the activities undertaken by Member States to prevent the recreational use of drugs is briefly reviewed in section III; UNDCP activities in response to the problem are covered in section IV; and conclusions are presented in section V.

4. UNDCP has previously dealt with the issue of drug abuse among children and young people in the following two reports: "World situation with regard to drug abuse, in particular among children and youth" (E/CN.7/2001/4); and "Youth and drugs: a global overview" (E/CN.7/1999/8). Those reports included references to the illicit use of drugs for recreational purposes and during leisure time. Since they also provided the background of broader patterns of and trends in drug abuse among youth, which are important for understanding the issue of recreational use of drugs, those reports, as well as the 2002 report on the world situation with regard to drug abuse, in particular the spread of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) through drug injection (E/CN.7/2002/2), are brought to the attention of the Commission as additional sources of contextual information.

# II. The abuse of drugs in the context of recreational and leisure activities

5. The term "recreational use of drugs" is an imprecise term used to describe a pattern of drug use that usually takes place in the context of leisure activities, such as parties or dance events, and that is alleged to be non-dependent or non-compulsive. An example of such behaviour, which has recently attracted considerable attention, is the use of so-called dance drugs, in particular methylenedioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA), or Ecstasy, and related analogues. Even though no good evidence of physical dependence on MDMA is available, there is mounting evidence of neurotoxic effects and long-term harm, with users showing patterns of behaviour that appears compulsive and may include taking multiple doses over a short period of time.

6. Research indicates that recreational use of drugs is found primarily among young people who may also be using substances such as cannabis, cocaine, other amphetamine-type stimulants or lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), but also other substances such as gamma-hydroxybutyric acid, ketamine and alcohol. It is therefore more relevant to talk about polydrug use

(mixing or alternating a large range of substances) within recreational settings, than to concentrate on any one particular drug.

7. The stimulant properties of some of the drugs chosen for recreational use are exploited to allow the users to remain active for longer periods than would otherwise be possible. Nightclubs, discotheques and other social gathering places for youth have been at the centre of the widespread distribution and use of psychoactive substances. In that context, the drugs play a role as a social lubricant. At the same time, the recreational use of drugs is taking place in a cultural and social environment that has become more tolerant towards drugs, and in which young people are exposed to messages that give the impression that recreational use of drugs is safe, acceptable or glamorous, and may even be beneficial in the pursuit of material success and the satisfaction of personal needs.

8. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), in its 2001 "Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in the European Union", notes that the combined use of various substances, licit and illicit, is common among young people with an outgoing lifestyle. EMCDDA also reports a tendency to use different drugs in response to different needs and circumstances, and underlines the phenomenon of quickly changing patterns of experimentation or combinations of different substances to get "high" or balance the effects of the various substances used.

9. While the use of Ecstasy at parties and dance events is predominantly a phenomenon of western Europe, North America and Australia, prevalence data suggest that the patterns of use of amphetamine-type stimulants are diverse and are spreading to other parts of the world. In general terms, the abuse of synthetic drugs has stabilized in the States members of the European Union. However, upward trends are still observed in some cities or holiday resorts that are more likely to attract young tourists owing to their large offering of youth-oriented events. According to data collected by the European school survey project on alcohol and other drugs, lifetime experience with illicit drug use among 15- to 16-year olds doubled in almost all central and eastern European countries between 1995 and 1999. The increase reflects mostly cannabis, and, to a lesser extent, amphetamine-type stimulants, including MDMA, and LSD. In the United States of America, where the abuse of MDMA started later than in Europe, sharp increases have been reported in recent years among students. Young people in the United States now use Ecstasy more than cocaine. Ecstasy is being used in a variety of settings, and some evidence exists to suggest that the age groups involved appear to be getting younger. In addition, there are indications that methamphetamine is being used along with other drugs at dance venues.

10. Abuse of Ecstasy has been registered in some developing countries in the context of discotheques and dance clubs, but it has so far not reached high prevalence rates. In south-east Asia and in some parts of Africa, amphetamine-type stimulants are abused more for instrumental use by people such as truck drivers, agricultural workers, sex workers and also students (mainly to keep awake when preparing for examinations).

11. Recreational use of drugs has changed the traditional image of drug abuse as a part of the life of people living on the margin or underground, or excluded from society. The abuse of drugs is increasingly also taking place among mainstream youth during their free time, usually at weekends. That is particularly true for cannabis. There is a growing concern that cannabis and, to a lesser extent, amphetamine-type stimulants have become a part of the subculture of some young people. While it would be wrong to carry such concerns too far, the trend signals a risk that the dangers of drug abuse are being increasingly ignored, and that drug abuse is coming to be seen as a normal activity. That may be a problem, in particular, for drugs such as Ecstasy.

12. There are reports of acute health consequences even among first-time abusers of Ecstasy; and even though negative consequences may not be visible in the short term, there is mounting evidence that Ecstasy has neurotoxic effects and that its abuse may have an impact on the functioning of various body organs, including the liver and the heart. With the support of UNDCP, the World Health Organization (WHO) has carried out a global review of Ecstasy, MDMA and other ring-substituted amphetamines, indicating short-term physical effects such as increased jaw tension and grinding of teeth, loss of appetite, dry mouth, tachycardia, hot and cold flushes and sweaty palms, as well as long-term effects, including insomnia, depression, headaches and muscle stiffness. In

addition, the review indicates that, even though long-term effects of MDMA in humans are as yet unknown, animal studies and some studies on humans have suggested an alarming potential for long-term harm. From those studies it appears that brain damage is largely irreversible, and is not necessarily dependent on an extensive history of MDMA use.

## III. Action undertaken by Member States to prevent the recreational use of drugs

13. Given the short time since the adoption of Commission resolution 44/5, the present report on the action taken by Member States to prevent the use of illicit drugs for recreational purposes is based mainly on the information provided through the biennial reports questionnaire (109 replies in total), supplemented by information available from EMCDDA and a smaller number of publicly available studies

14. An analysis of the replies to the biennial reports questionnaire regarding the implementation of the Action Plan against Illicit Manufacture, Trafficking and Abuse of Amphetamine-type Stimulants and Their Precursors, adopted by the General Assembly at its twentieth special session (resolution S-20/4 A) show that more than a half of the responding Governments reported that they had adopted measures to raise awareness of the problem of amphetamine-type stimulants, which, as noted above, is a key part of the problem of recreational use. Several Governments have launched national prevention campaigns and comprehensive strategies to reduce the demand for illicit drugs, including amphetamine-type stimulants. In some countries, increased efforts were being made to inform youth, parents and mentors of the harmful effects of such substances.

15. In several countries in Europe and south-east Asia, controls at entertainment sites and discotheques have been strengthened. Ireland provides examples of such measures, where health-service personnel and the police have informed the staff of nightclubs of the dangers of amphetamine-type stimulants. In Italy, an agreement on special measures to be taken in discotheques has been signed between the Government and the national association of discotheque owners. In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports has advised local authorities on regulations for large-scale events. Organizers are required to provide free drinking water, experienced first aid staff, adequate ventilation and chill-out rooms.

16. As noted in previous reports on drug abuse among youth, young people at school age are increasingly experimenting with drugs, even though the extent to which that happens varies. It is therefore critical that prevention activities target school populations. There is some evidence that that is being done. Data from the biennial reports questionnaire suggest that prevention work most commonly occurs in schools and involves providing information. Sixty-eight per cent of the responding States reported relatively extensive school-based drug education programmes. Just over a half of the responding States also reported extensive community-based education programmes and slightly less than a half noted extensive prevention programmes in health centres. Life-skills development programmes were mostly provided in school settings.

17. Even though abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants is increasingly concentrated among youth and threatening to become a part of specific youth subcultures, only 39 per cent of the reporting Governments indicated that they had adopted specific programmes to prevent youth from experimenting with such substances. Several of those Governments reported that school-based prevention programmes to inform youth of the harmful effects of illicit drugs, including amphetamine-type stimulants, had been widely implemented. The mass media, television commercials and printed materials were used to inform young people of the adverse effects of drug abuse. Seminars, sports events and cultural activities were also generally used to deter teenagers from experimenting with amphetamine-type stimulants.

18. In several of the States members of the European Union, the majority of projects identified by EMCDDA as specific to abuse of synthetic drugs is based on a harm-reduction approach. Those projects may entail on-site support, advice information and counselling at large rave events, and are usually part of a wider harm-reduction approach that has been endorsed at the local level. Leaflets, flyers, posters, booklets and materials on safer drug use are distributed in clubs, venues, record shops and other relevant outlets. They are

targeted at individuals who may already have taken drugs as well as at potential users. In some of the States members of the European Union, including Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, on-site pill testing is offered to drug using young participants at dance events.

19. The biennial reports questionnaire does not contain questions as to whether or not young people are involved in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of prevention strategies targeting illicit drug use among young people. It is therefore not possible to provide information on that particular aspect of the recommendations contained in Commission resolution 44/5. Nor is it possible to glean information about the degree to which States have adapted their research on drug addiction and their treatment networks and health, education and social services, taking into account the new patterns of illicit drug use among young people. It is, however, widely recognized, and discussed among professionals, that treatment services designed to meet the needs of opiate abusers perform poorly in terms of attracting young people who misuse amphetamine-type stimulants.

## IV. UNDCP activities

20. In its resolution 44/5, the Commission requested UNDCP to provide to States, upon request, guidance and assistance in developing strategies and programmes for reducing illicit drug demand, especially among young people in recreational areas. The widespread abuse of drugs and its association with leisure and recreation settings require the identification of innovative approaches and an adjustment of prevention strategies. It also requires the involvement and participation of young people in the process of reviewing and rethinking the strategies. While it is not possible to identify one single effective approach to the prevention of drug abuse among youth, there are some elements to consider when developing such strategies. They include the development of life skills, the enhancement of protective factors, the provision of factual information and of alternative activities, peer education etc. Those topics have been further developed in the report of the Executive Director entitled "World situation with regard to drug abuse, in particular among children and youth" (E/CN.7/2001/4).

21. To prevent drug abuse among youth, UNDCP has provided assistance to various Member States on the basis of the above-mentioned programming elements. The assistance has usually been offered in the context of the development of broader national drug abuse prevention programmes, and it has varied in accordance with local needs. There are, however, some common elements. The majority of the programmes targeting young people are school-based, for the simple reason that in the majority of the countries the school system provides the widest coverage in terms of reaching young people. However, UNDCP has also promoted the development of out-of-school activities, the involvement of parents and, above all, the adoption of peer-to-peer approaches.

22. One of the key tools for assessing exposure to drug abuse among youth populations is school surveys using standardized methods. Notable work in that area include the European school survey project on alcohol and other drugs, the "Monitoring the future" study in the United States and the work of the Organization of American States, which has adopted school surveys as a key demand indicator. UNDCP is currently supporting school surveys in a number of States, including extensive exercises in the Caribbean in partnership with the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission and the Caribbean Epidemiology Centre. As part of the UNDCP Global Assessment Programme on Drug Abuse, a tool-kit module on school survey methods is being produced and will be available in 2002.

23. In its resolution 44/5, the Commission also requested UNDCP to gather detailed, evaluated information on successful experiences in prevention programmes in countries throughout the world and to disseminate that information to States and practitioners. The Global Youth Network against Drug Abuse, initiated by UNDCP and launched at the Drug Abuse Prevention Forum organized by Youth Vision Jeunesse in Banff, Canada, in 1998, has grown to include over 70 groups from more than 40 countries. The groups are linked through a LISTSERV on a daily basis and through a newsletter published quarterly.

24. The Network has been expanded through the training of youth groups regionally in needs assessment and programme planning and by financially supporting a few of the trained groups through small grants. The Network has also organized a series of meetings to

share experiences that will serve as the basis for developing best practices and publications on different aspects of working in prevention with young people. The first such publication, entitled *Equal Partners: Organizing for Youth by Youth Events*, was released in 2001 to guide those who wish to organize meetings and conferences targeting young people with the effective involvement of young people. Three additional publications are being prepared, covering the following topics: the use of peer-to-peer techniques for drug demand reduction; how to handle HIV/AIDS and young injecting drug abusers; and using sport for the prevention of drug abuse.

25. The Global Initiative on Primary Prevention of Substance Abuse is another activity that combines work on best practices with capacity-building, specifically in mobilizing local communities for the prevention of substance abuse among children and young people. About 120 local partner organizations, mainly non-governmental, in Belarus, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, South Africa, Thailand, United Republic of Tanzania, Viet Nam and Zambia, have been trained in conducting local situation assessments and in developing community-based prevention activities based on the assessments. It is estimated that more than 150,000 young people and adults, including parents, teachers and youth workers, will benefit directly from the community-based activities that the local partner organizations have developed with the support of UNDCP and WHO within the framework of the Global Initiative.

26. UNDCP is currently undertaking a review of evidence-based best practices and promising approaches in prevention throughout the world. The results of the review will be made available during the first half of 2002 in the form of a publication on best practices including case studies from all regions of the world, and will cover various aspects of prevention, such as how to develop appropriate means of communicating and distributing information aimed at young people and designed to promote healthy ways of life conducive to the enjoyment of free time without the use of drugs. The lessons learned from the Global Youth Network and the Global Initiative will be incorporated into the review.

27. UNDCP has also supported a WHO project on strengthening the strategic responses to the health and social consequences of the use of amphetamine-type stimulants (with special reference to MDMA/Ecstasy). The project aims at improving understanding of the nature, extent and context of the use of amphetamine-type stimulants, and of the health and social consequences related to such use in different cultural settings. One of the priority research areas is the use of Ecstasy by young people.

## V. Conclusions

28. The recent trends in drug abuse among young people indicate that, at least in developed countries and increasingly elsewhere, the abuse of illicit drugs has become more popular among mainstream youth. There is also a risk that drug abuse in recreational settings is increasingly becoming part of the lifestyle of certain youth groups. While recreational use of drugs is typically associated with Ecstasy and the dance world, the epidemiological evidence indicates that those who are using Ecstasy are in most cases polydrug abusers who are consuming a wide variety of both legal and illegal substances, cannabis being the most common illegal drug. Also, the abuse of drugs for recreational purposes is not taking place only in discotheques or at dance parties. The phenomenon of recreational drug use is also characterized by quickly changing patterns of use and experimentation.

29. It is important to be able quickly to identify changing patterns of drug use among various youth subcultures. That calls for the establishment of early warning systems, able to capture such changes in a rapid way. Such systems would need to include qualitative information.

30. While there is a relatively benign picture of the use of amphetamine-type stimulants in recreational settings among certain youth groups, serious health consequences have been reported even among first-time abusers of Ecstasy. There is also mounting evidence that Ecstasy has neurotoxic effects and that its abuse has an impact on the functioning of various body organs, including the liver and the heart.

31. It is important to conduct further research into the health and social consequences of the abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants in order to determine the long-term negative effects of their abuse and to refute the notion that the recreational use of Ecstasy and other amphetamine-type stimulants is harmless.

32. Even though the abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants is increasingly concentrated among youth and threatens to become a part of specific youth subcultures, only a small proportion of the Governments replying to the biennial reports questionnaire indicated that they had adopted specific programmes to prevent youth from experimenting with amphetamine-type stimulants.

33. The new patterns of drug abuse require enhanced efforts in prevention and the development of new approaches to it. The social context of the dance world, fashion, trendsetters and peer group norms play a significant role in the recreational use of drugs. Prevention efforts should aim at influencing those factors. It is also important to involve young people in the development of programmes to prevent recreational use of drugs.

34. Another issue that needs to be addressed is the development of appropriate treatment services for abusers of amphetamine-type stimulants, and more generally the development of accessible and open counselling services able to attract recreational users.

35. Finally, the available information suggests that the recreational use of drugs is largely concentrated in western Europe, North America and Australia. However, pockets of such use can also be found in other regions. Given the globalization of youth cultures, it would be advisable to address the emerging problem at an early stage by developing new approaches to the prevention of drug abuse in recreational environments, and by sharing experiences between countries that have a history of dealing with the problem and those that are new to it.